

The New Literacies Narrative

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... literacy is always plural: *literacies* (there are many of them ... and we all have some and fail to have others). ...

—James Paul Gee

I've been teaching a version of the literacy narrative for several years. In my first attempt, I taught the assignment as outlined by Anne Beaufort: a short narrative essay centered on the topic of the writer's experience reading and writing (187). Susan DeRosa notes that "students' literacy narratives could provide a space for them to rewrite versions of their literacy experiences and events," allowing them to become "active participants in the construction of their literacy development" in order to "challenge prescriptive ideas about literacy" (2). When I taught this assignment for the first time, though, that didn't happen.

The unit wasn't a disaster, mind you. Several students wrote great literacy narratives, and many of them said they appreciated the opportunity to write about their lives. It just ... fell a little flat. I had a hard time getting students to fully engage with their literacy experiences, let alone challenge their preconceived notions of literacy. While responding to my students' papers, I quickly identified a pattern I call the "literacy narrative arc": students provide an anecdote about their early love for reading; then, they describe a high school teacher who extinguished their natural thirst for literacy by assigning *The Scarlet Letter*; finally, they close with a general statement about the importance of literacy (they are writing for an English teacher, after all). I'm astonished by the number of papers that follow this arc, and not just because I liked *The Scarlet Letter*. It is perhaps not surprising that students choose to relate their experiences using such a familiar pattern—I'm asking them to compose in an unfamiliar genre, so it's natural that they would need a foothold. It's hard to overcome the deeply entrenched Midwestern humility that keeps you from wanting to write about yourself, from portraying your experiences as anything other than average. Still, I knew that there was potential for more critical thought in this assignment, and that this potential wasn't being realized.

I also couldn't shake a more troubling thought that nagged at me throughout the semester. I intended this assignment to allow students an opportunity for creative expression, to give them a chance to reflect on what I assumed was a powerful force in their lives as students. Yet,

not every student enters the academy with a deep connection to reading and writing. I had assumed that literacy would be a driving force in my students' lives, but did I just assume this because, as an English teacher, it had been a driving force in mine? Deborah Brandt argues that literacy acquisition is controlled by literacy "sponsors" who are often guided as much by their own profit motives as they are by altruism—sponsors "set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty" (166–167). Sponsorship is thus linked with "processes of stratification, competition, and reappropriation" (183). By telling my students that their experiences with printed text are the only experiences worth discussing in their personal essays, was I abusing my role as a literacy sponsor? Was I not taking their values seriously? The point of introductory composition isn't to train future English teachers. As much as I would like to make my students believers in the transformative power of reading, is that really my job as a composition instructor? I liked (and still like) teaching the literacy narrative assignment, and I saw (and still see) value in it, but it clearly needed some reframing if it was going to work for me.

The first thing I need to do is figure out what the hell I mean by "literacy." James Paul Gee helps here, reminding me of multiple literacies, yet Gee, as a linguist, still keeps his focus largely on language, while the field of literacy studies has broadened even more to include digital, cultural, multimodal, and embodied literacies, as well as other forms of non-print-based literacy. With all of the rich work being done in literacy studies, how could I tell my students that the only type of literacy they can write about relates to reading and writing? I hoped that allowing students to write about alternative literacies would make the assignment more valuable and relevant to their lives outside the English classroom.

The initial results were promising. Over the course of the unit, I introduced my students to various literacies. I began by giving them a definition of literacy proposed by Anne Ruggles Gere in *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*: "... literacy means joining a specific community through understanding the issues it considers important and developing the capacity to participate in conversations about those issues" (119–120). We added to and modified this definition throughout the unit. For their first project, what I'm calling a "New Literacies Narrative," I gave them two options: they could choose to go the more traditional route, writing about their experiences with written texts, or they could write about a form of non-print-based literacy that has played a significant role in their lives.

One student, who chose the pseudonym Walter White¹ to honor the protagonist of *Breaking Bad*, wrote his literacy narrative on the literacy involved in his paintball team. In doing so, he was forced to look at his team as a discourse community, analyze its communication and other literate practices, and justify it as a form of literacy. James, a student who stood out due to his intelligence and professional demeanor, surprised me with a literacy narrative about his experiences as a high school drug dealer. Even students who chose the traditional literacy narrative option did so because they had something unique and significant to say about their literacy acquisition. Not every paper was A-quality, of course, but not one paper followed the "literacy narrative arc." Overall, the papers showed more evidence of critical thinking and reflection while still achieving the pedagogical goals outlined by Beaufort. The success of this unit inspired me to incorporate it into my summer syllabus. What follows is a discussion of two summer students, Li and Brandon, and their exploration of their own literate practices.

Li

From my teaching log, dated June 16, 2014, a day devoted to draft conferences:

Li is a bit unclear. She has essentially an analysis/ reflection paper on the movie The Life of Pi. She talks (a little) about the literacy in the film and how it affected her, but it's not a literacy narrative. After

talking a while, she realizes she didn't quite understand the goals of the assignment.

Li as a writer is very metaphorical, and she's mentioned that she likes to leave her writing unclear to a certain extent for poetic effect.

This is evident in her writing, and while OK in theory, I'm worried that it results in a lack of clarity or focus. Sometimes I don't know if ~~she~~ she's being deliberately obtuse or if she doesn't understand what she's supposed to be doing. If she can pull this off, it will be really cool, but I'm concerned.

¹ I refer to all students by pseudonyms.

Li, an international student from China, has just been cleared to take English classes with "native" speakers. She is an active participant during class discussions and often sees connections that her classmates don't. When we watch *Stephen Fry in America* to jump-start our discussion of cultural literacy, she writes her response paper on the literacy of the unseen film crew as a discourse community—I can't say it was completely successful, but I never would have thought to take that direction.

Despite her active participation, Li tells me that she still struggles with English. In her Unit One reflection, when asked about the most challenging aspect of the assignment, she replies: "Maybe the grammar and the appropriate using of vocabulary, my words are not local enough, and this causes misunderstanding." She brings several drafts of her paper to my office, and we discuss her grammar and usage concerns. She mentions that she's sometimes insecure about speaking in front of the class, but from my perspective, she has no problem making herself understood, at least in spoken conversation.

Yet it's true that English Language Learners (ELLs) are often characterized as "outsiders" within the academy. Vivian Zamel, in the title of a 1995 CCC article, refers to ELL students as "strangers in academia." She writes that, in the case of international students who struggle with the conventions of writing in English, "language use [is] confounded with intellectual ability" (507), and faculty members often dismiss their intelligence. Suresh Canagarajah takes this a step further, arguing that American composition instruction's "monolingualist" focus forces multilingual students to the academic margins. Drawing on his own experience, he writes: "Only the color of my skin would influence someone to call me a non-native speaker of English—not my level of competence, process of acquisition, or time of learning" (589–590). The "non-native" label, imprecise as it is, is one of the quickest ways to identify students as outsiders. Even before these students arrive in class, their "foreign" names on the roster often lead teachers to assume that they will have to spend extra time working through and evaluating their "nonstandard" syntax. *I can't say I've never been guilty of this.* Li's insecurity indicates that she's deeply acquainted with these issues, whether or not she's read the relevant scholarship.

As I indicate in my teaching log, Li tends to think and write in metaphors. After some initial confusion and a half-drafted rhetorical analysis of *Life of Pi*, she decides to write her literacy narrative about the cultural and embodied literacies involved in meditation. She opens her narrative with an original poem:

The sky, blue sky. / The breeze, soft breeze. /
The echo, deep and repeat echo. / The deer, the
infinite running deer. / The flower, / I never smelled
a sunflower. / I smell it. / I'm smelling it. / Is
it like a cucumber? / Is it like a lavender, or a
forget-me-not? / Maybe I just forget it.

The poem is my favorite part of the narrative. The fact that Li is a poet and a philosophy major is evident in her writing. As I read her papers, I often struggle to comprehend her prose, and I'm not sure whether to attribute this to the language barrier, the possibility that she doesn't understand the assignment, or a deliberate, aesthetic indirectness:

The world, fulfilled with smiling whales, endless running deer, floating dandelion, and sometimes soft melody. It is more than the visual scene for me, it is a small branch of water carefully flows to my mind. I feel I am inside, and immersed like I'm not even an entity. The communication sometimes comes out with the topic to flowers and animals.

Hmm. I'm not sure if "branch of water" is a metaphor or a misused idiom. The poetic language is actually making it more difficult to parse. Does she mean "fulfilled" or "filled"? "Filled" seems to make more sense. Is the sentence fragment intentional? What do I mark?

Despite Li's usage difficulties, this assignment seems to unlock something for her. The meditation topic suits her poetic, metaphor-heavy writing style. A lot of my students who write about non-print-based literacies describe their literacy in terms of communication. Li does the same, but with an interesting twist:

Every time when we do this,² we added a feeling of empathy to each other. It was a conversation without words, but heart to heart, making me feel myself in a community that involves to similar type of people and then I felt so powerful to face myself instead of resisting. It was such a solid back up of others because everybody was so satisfied in the position.

I've never thought about literacy like this before. We've talked about the communicative aspects of literacy, but I guess I've been thinking about it in terms of written or oral language, not as a "conversation without words." I suppose it makes sense that someone who's insecure about her language use would value this type of communication. There's something really powerful about this. It looks like giving Li an opportunity to write about one of her passions, something that makes her feel comfortable, is making the transition to American academic writing easier. Perhaps one form of literacy can lead to another.

² meditate

I believe storytelling can be a powerful tool for international students to situate their experiences with literacy in the contexts of both their home country and the United States. An Cheng, writing about his experiences teaching a graduate-level academic writing class to a group of ELLs, identifies the literacy narrative as a way to understand "the possible connections between learners' lived literacy learning experiences" and their approach to learning in his course (292). Speaking from my own experience as a teacher, many of my international students have used the literacy narrative as a way to reflect on the cultural and linguistic adjustments they had to make when moving to the United States, and several have used it as an opportunity to explain the differences between the educational systems of their home countries and the U.S. Though Li does not write about learning the English language or American culture, she does use the meditation theme as a bridge between her life in China and the United States. I look forward to seeing what she writes for her next paper.

About halfway through the term, though, I receive an email from Li. Despite doing fairly well in the course, she tells me she's decided to drop. She's enrolled in a philosophy course and can't work under the pressure of both classes. She asks if I'm teaching FYC in the fall, and if so, if she can retake my section. I tell her I'm not, but that there are plenty of excellent teachers who are. I wish her luck. I don't hear from her again.

Brandon

An excerpt from my teaching observation log, same day:

Brandon is on the right track. Writing about basketball. Writing is a bit sparse and disconnected, but not distressingly so. He mentioned that he was asked to write a traditional (reading/writing/school-based) literacy narrative last fall, and that he hated the assignment because he didn't see it as a driving force in his life (my paraphrase). He'll be one to watch. Will his increased engagement translate to increased success?

Brandon is a quiet one. He's retaking FYC after an unsuccessful first attempt last fall, an experience he characterizes as extremely negative. He did not get along with his instructor, whose name he mentions halfway through the semester. *Awkward—his former instructor is a good friend of mine.* Despite the fact that I know him to be a thoughtful teacher, Brandon did not respond well to his "old school" methods. Unfortunately, this experience resulted in Brandon internalizing the idea that he is a "bad writer."

Gatekeeping is inevitably a function of introductory courses. Some students don't pass, and sometimes a failing grade is an indication that the student might not thrive in the university environment. But it's more complicated than that. Jeff Smith notes that our students do not "simply materialize in our classes on Day 1 of each new term," as they must pass through several gates (high school graduation, college admission) to get there (302). Our students are, in a sense, already members of the academic community by virtue of being present in our classrooms. Yet, in a very real way, they are still outside academic discourse. Brandon is reserved during group work and often seems "stuck." He writes in his reflection that he wishes he were "able to give better detail" in his paper, but that he "wasn't able to because I'm not good at explaining them." Yet, despite Brandon's concerns, his paper demonstrates skill and literacy.

Brandon decides to write his literacy narrative about basketball. In fact, every paper he writes for the class ends up being about basketball. Though he's concerned about his paper lacking detail, he does attempt to set a scene for his reader. He opens his paper with a fantasy sequence in which he scores the last-second winning basket at an important game. He describes the bus ride home after deciding he wants to play basketball in middle school, where he plugs in his headphones to drown out the noise because "[his] mind was too set on becoming an athlete." His paper isn't perfect (*what paper ever is?*), but it is solid. It's fairly well-structured, and his narrative voice comes through.

This paper also shows a decent understanding of the complex, situationally-dependent definition of literacy. Tony Mirabelli writes in his exploration of the literacy involved in food service work (a reading which I give my students in excerpted form) that "... literacy extends beyond individual experiences with reading and writing to include the various modes of communication and situations of any socially meaningful group or network where language is used in multiple ways" (146). With this in mind, Brandon describes the literacy of basketball:

I was able to become literate in basketball in a way anyone would be able to. First, a player must

practice extremely hard so they can become good at it. They must have good communication skills between their teammates and also their coach. Hand signals are a way of communicating in basketball, but code words such as Five Game, are used more commonly. After all, you don't want the other team hearing what you're about to do. You also want to learn the duties of other positions so you are able to know what their next move is in the game. These are things I would practice and study every single day to hopefully one day become who I wanted to be.

There are a few generalities and underdeveloped ideas here, but this paragraph does make some astute connections between basketball and literacy. What does "Five Game" mean? Clearly I'm an outsider here. In this paragraph, Brandon makes a strong case for the definition of this communicative knowledge as literacy.

Knowledge of basketball can also be considered a form of embodied literacy. Elisabeth Johnson and Lalitha Vasudevan write about the importance of recognizing the crucial role embodiment plays in literacy, noting that "The body is a text produced by socially circulating norms for gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and ability. Through daily, bodily repetitions . . . we reproduce and reinscribe these meanings. . . . This leads us to conceptualize critical literacy as performed" (35). Though I don't get this theoretical with my FYC students, Brandon's narrative highlights the importance of recognizing the value of embodied literacies in the classroom. Basketball requires a great deal of athleticism and finesse. Embodied literacy can be seen not only in the hand signals Brandon references, but in the playing of the game itself. A player must know how to execute specific plays and respond instantaneously to the movements made by his or her teammates and opponents. Brandon clearly bases part of his identity on this embodied literacy, as evidenced by his singular focus on the topic throughout the semester. I have several colleagues who, after grading dozens of sport-related papers from our basketball-obsessed school, have banned the topic from their classroom, but allowing Brandon to explore his literacy as a basketball player validates an important aspect of his identity. Banning topics, whether it be basketball or any other form of non-print-based literacy, sends the message that these topics (and, by extension, our students' passions) are unworthy of academic consideration.

When asked what his favorite part of the unit was, Brandon answers, "My favorite part was learning what literacy really is. I was so used to it just being about reading and

writing, so I thought I wasn't very literate, but now I know that people are literate in their own ways." In this response, Brandon expresses his outsider, "not very literate" identity, an identity that seems to be caused both by internal "refusal" of academic values and external "lack of nourishment" (Masiel 2-3). Though he indicates in his narrative that his academic struggles began in high school, his failing grade in his first semester of FYC likely solidified that identity. Framing his knowledge of basketball in terms of literacy enabled Brandon to finally see himself as literate, as a potential member of the academic community.

Brandon's case complicates the notion that one is ever fully an academic "insider" or "outsider." The fact that he did not initially pass through the gate of FYC would make Brandon an outsider. I as a composition instructor would be an insider. Yet, to a certain extent, the roles were reversed in this assignment, as I know virtually nothing about basketball. The New Literacies Narrative allowed Brandon to own his expertise by educating me about something he cares about. It gave him an opportunity to teach the teacher, an admitted outsider in relation to the basketball community. I believe this inspired a confidence that made the paper stronger—it was the clearest, most detailed paper he turned in that semester. Brandon's performance on this paper suggests that this assignment may be a way to begin bridging the academic insider/outsider divide that appears to be impenetrable to so many first-year students. Brandon ultimately passes my summer course. The gate has been opened to him.



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